

**THE GOD WHO HIDES
October 10, 2010**

**JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Psalm 66:1-12
Exodus 33:12-23
John 1:18
Romans 8:38-39**

**“You shall see my back,
but my face shall not be seen”
Exodus 33:23 (NRSV)**

Give us grace to apprehend by faith the power
and wisdom which lie beyond our understanding,
and in worship to feel that which we do not know,
and to praise even what we do not understand:
so that in the presence of your glory we may be humble,
and in the knowledge of your judgment we may repent,
and in the assurance of your mercy,
we may rejoice and be glad.

Reinhold Niebuhr
Justice and Mercy

*You come to us out of darkness and mystery.
You come in ways for which our poor words, our concepts,
our creeds and theologies, our images, are not adequate.
You come in the questions we ask, in our doubts
and our struggles with belief and disbelief.
So startle us this morning with your truth,
in Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord. Amen.*

With impeccable timing in regard to my sermon this morning, John Vest, our youth ministry pastor, emailed his colleagues last week a list of questions about God and related matters submitted by the eighth grade members of the Confirmation class.

They, most of them, along with many of our families, are in Saugatuck, Michigan, this morning attending Fourth Church Family Camp.

But I trust someone will tell them that they provided me with a gift, an email from heaven this week—a perfect lead in to my sermon.

Here are some of the questions the eighth graders are asking:

Why does God let bad things like child abuse happen?
Why doesn't God call out to serial killers and tell them not to do that?
Has God been around forever? Will he be around forever?
Where is God?
What is God's purpose?
Does God ever not forgive us?
In the Bible it says that all men are created equal. Does God still think this?
Does God love everyone equally? Is that fair?
Does God speak to people? If only certain people, why them?
Where is God when I screw up, and why doesn't God tell me what to do?
Does God really exist?

Some are about the human condition.

One of my friend's fathers had the chance to take a job in England or in the World Trade Center. He took the job in England. But a lot of his friends were at the World Trade Center, and a lot of them died on 9/11. Why? How does God chose who has to die?

Why do bad things happen to good people? Mr. Bumpus shouldn't have died. (Steve Bumpus, a beloved Sunday Schol teacher died suddenly earlier this year.)

Why does God let Eddy get Lyme Disease?

Why does God let life get so hard?

Some were about the Bible.

Why are most of the main people in the Bible men?
Do you have to believe in God to be a Presbyterian?
Does heaven exist?
What really happens after death?

There are more. But the humanness and honesty of those questions are remarkable. It has been my experience that most people ask these questions all their lives.

Will Campbell is an irreverent Southern Baptist preacher, social activist, great storyteller, author of several good books—*Soul among Lions*, most recently—and a very thoughtful and funny commentator on life, church, religion in general. Campbell was a friend of country western singer Waylon

Jennings. In fact, on one occasion he was the cook for one of Jennings fabled bus tours. Jennings was not known for excessive piety. Campbell remembers one night in the middle of the bus tour asking, "Waylon, what do you believe?" "'Yeah,' he answered. . . . After a long silence I asked, 'Yeah? What's that supposed to mean?' More silence, until Waylon said, 'Uh huh.' That ended my prying into ole Waylon's soul."

Will Campbell reflects,

Today we are bombarded with a theology of certitude. I don't find much biblical support for the stance of "God told me and I'm telling you, as if you don't believe as I do, you're doomed," a sort of "my god can whip your god" posture. From Abraham, going out in faith not knowing where he was being sent, to Jesus on the cross beseeching the Father for a better way, there was always more inquiring faith than conceited certainty. It occurs to me that the troubadour's response that late night might have been the most profound affirmation of faith I had ever heard." (*Soul among Lions*, pp. 8-9)

Belief in God and its opposite, atheism, are much in the news these days. A series of best sellers—Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*—argue against belief in God and against religion in general and have brought the issue of the existence of God, and what it means to believe in God, into sharp focus, with a resultant public conversation about the topic. Everyone, it seems, is interested and has something to say.

The *Wall Street Journal* published a story about Navy Chaplain Terry Moran, serving in Afghanistan, and his chaplain assistant, Specialist 2nd Class Philip Chute, an atheist. Chaplain Moran is convinced and teaches that if you trust God, God will protect you from harm, while Private Chute covers his back. He says the chaplain "trusts God to protect him and keep him safe. I'm just here in case it doesn't work out." The reporter asked a senior officer about the requirements for chaplain assistant and was told, "Assistants don't have to be religious. They have to be able to shoot straight" (*Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 2010).

A recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey turned up the interesting fact that atheists and agnostics know a lot more about religion than believers do. Writing about the report, *Tribune* columnist Clarence Page said, "Americans are deeply religious but also deeply ignorant about religion. . . . In my opinion," Page writes, "atheists are vastly outnumbered by agnostics whose bumper sticker might read, 'Honk If You're Not Sure.'"

And so a series of sermons on what the Bible says and what we believe about God.

In her book *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong says, "Religion [is] not something tacked on to the human condition, an optional extra imposed on people by unscrupulous priests. The desire to develop a sense of the transcendent may be the defining human characteristic" (*The Case for God*, p.9).

Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins make the case for atheism by locating the most bizarre examples of religion they can find and then, after making them look as foolish as they are, discrediting them: the "Hell House" created by an evangelical preacher to scare children away from sin at Halloween; Pat Robinson announcing that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment on the people of New Orleans for their tolerance of homosexuality. Hitchens and Dawkins apparently believe that all religions are like that, that the essence of Islam is terrorism and the essence of Christianity is fundamentalism; that there are no sophisticated, intellectually legitimate, academically respected Christian scholars. Dawkins argues that religion is not only delusional but pernicious. I agree sometimes. I shudder at Fred Phelps and his followers picketing the funerals of young American soldiers, carrying signs that say God hates America for tolerating homosexuality, signs that read "God is pleased when American soldiers die" and "Thank God for roadside bombs." I'm equally ashamed and angry, as are the vast majority of Muslims, when Faisal Shazhad, whose homemade car bomb failed to detonate in crowded Times Square, is sentenced to a life in prison and, raising an index finger, announces "Allahu Akbar," "God is great."

We are bombarded by certainty indeed, some of it lethal. And so it is important to be reminded that there is in our own religious tradition what Karen Armstrong calls a "deliberate and principled reticence about God" (Preface, p. xviii), the most eloquent and oldest example of which is in the Exodus 33 passage we read this morning.

We left Moses in the wilderness pondering the meaning of a burning bush and a voice that calls him by name and orders him to return to Egypt and to lead his people out of slavery. He's a wanted man: the last place on earth he wants to be is Egypt, where there is a price on his head. "Who are you?" he asks. "If I go, who shall I say sent me?" And the voice says, "I AM WHO I AM; tell them I AM sent you." It's not a name. It's the basic grammatical building block of language—the "be" verb. God is not an object that can be named. God is "being itself," Paul Tillich put it, "the ground of all being." And so the religion of Moses' people doesn't have a name for God, just a series of consonants, YHWH, which we pronounce Yahweh. The point is—and in the long history of human thinking about God (most of which is anthropomorphic, that is God is like us, only bigger) this point is absolutely

unique and very important—God is holy; God is other, different, transcendent.

Now Moses is at Sinai where the people are encamped and where a covenant with God (Yahweh) has been established and a law, The Ten Commandments, given. Now it's time to move on into an unknown future toward a promised land. And Moses makes the most understandable of requests: Show me something here. Give me some proof that I'm not imagining all this—the burning bush, the voice. Give me something tangible, something to hold on to. Let me see your face.

Down across generations and centuries, God's answer to Moses' simple request has been remembered: "There is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by: then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back: but my face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:23-24).

So deep in our own tradition is this remarkable notion that God can never be totally seen, comprehended, captured by human language. Deep in the tradition itself is that God shields Moses' eyes, that for God to be God, God must remain hidden. People who study the development of human ideas about God identify the seventeenth-century as a critical turning point.

At the beginning of the modern age, the age of Isaac Newton, when science and human reason began to encourage and actually organize civilization, religion followed suit and Christian scholars tried to describe Christian beliefs as rationally and reasonably as possible. Our own Presbyterian ancestors, in 1647, wrote with supreme confidence in the Shorter Catechism "Question: 'What is God?' Answer: 'God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.'" Not a word there about mystery, about a God who covers Moses' eyes so he can't see everything.

Isaac Newton, brilliant mathematician, argued that the universe operates according to rational principles, that God set things going in the beginning; the human mind is capable of figuring it all out because it is all finally reasonable, rational.

The high point came in 1900 when at the International Congress of Mathematicians in Paris, a German mathematician announced that there were just 23,000 outstanding questions in the Newtonian system, and once they were solved, our knowledge of the universe would be complete.

Mathematicians and physicists don't talk like that anymore. What happened, in our own time, was a new science—Neils Bohr and Albert

Einstein and something called quantum mechanics, which, while I don't even begin to understand, contradicted every major conclusion of Newtonian physics (see Armstrong, p. 264).

"The findings of science are inherently provisional," Albert Einstein announced. That is, things are not nailed down. Conclusions—about the universe, the nature of matter—that we assumed were final, are not final at all (p. 266).

And suddenly physicists started sounding like theologians. Einstein said, "The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of all art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable does really exist . . . is the center of all true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious men" (p. 268).

At the heart of our faith is a humility, an acknowledgement that we do not know everything there is to know about ultimate things, about God. And that it is how God intends it. From that acknowledgment and humility at the heart of what we believe comes a willingness to listen to what other people have to say, a respect for other cultural and religious traditions, a deep respect for people of other faiths. We do not respect Islam because we are soft on Christianity, as some are saying. Our respect comes from that oldest and most precious of our beliefs—that God is never completely known by anyone. It is not because we are soft or politically correct that sometimes we answer with integrity, "We don't know the answer to that question," but because of Moses standing there in a cleft in the rock, unable to see the face of God.

Now this is, in no way, a suggestion that we stop thinking about God or using our minds, our intellects, our amazing critical faculties, to ask the most difficult questions, to struggle with the most vexing challenges. To the contrary, it is to lift up, acknowledge and celebrate that good Christian tradition of intellectual inquiry. It is simply a reminder that there are limits to human knowledge, that ultimate truth lies beyond understanding, that humility before the mystery is our most important human characteristic and Christian tradition.

God means for it to be this way. God means for there to be freedom to think, inquire, struggle, and doubt. God means for human beings to have faith, to trust, when the answers have all run out, which ultimately they do. God means for us to remember that no one has all the truth all the time.

My good friend Michael Sternfield, Rabbi at Chicago Sinai Congregation, sent me a copy of a sermon he preached recently on the existence of God. Michael ended with a story about a famous philosopher who gave a lecture

before a large Jewish audience on the subject, "A Critique of the Existence of God." The lecture was well attended; a thousand people wanted to hear what the philosopher said about God not existing. It was a long lecture, and as it went on and on the speaker noticed that people were leaving. Finally, when only a few were left he asked the chairman, "Mr. Chairman, am I talking too long?" "No," said the chairman, "your lecture is not too long. And you proved to almost everyone's satisfaction that God does not exist, but you see it's almost time to assemble for our evening worship service. And, God forbid, we wouldn't want to be late" (Rabbi Michael Sternfield, Chicago Sinai Congregation, quoted by permission).

The question of God is one every human being asks and, in one way or another, answers. What makes us Christian is the conviction that God has decided to reach across the gap between the transcendent and the mundane, the sacred and the human, and, in one whom we know as God's own Son, to show us what we need to know about God. "No one has ever seen God," the Gospel of John says. "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

What we and millions before us have concluded is that God is love; that we can know, looking at, thinking about that man, Jesus, how he lived, how he taught, how he forgave and accepted and welcomed all, how he healed and reached out to the lost and marginalized, how he died—we know enough about God to trust God with our own lives, our futures, our deaths.

Chaplain Lt. Moran and Specialist 2nd Class Chute and their patrol came to a "bombed-out house, where the Marines from the 2nd Platoon were camped out, their fingers black with dirt and faces etched with exhaustion. One marine asked the chaplain if he'd offer a quick service. So under the watchful eye of Private Chute, he did. He read the 91st Psalm—"Thou shall not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day." He prayed, and then weary and frightened young men sang a hymn they all knew, believers, nonbelievers, and everyone in between: "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

Two thousand years ago, a follower of Jesus, on his way to his own death, asked his version of the eternal human question, the same question that our eighth graders so eloquently asked, the same question philosophers and scholars have grappled with, the question you and I find ourselves asking:

"What are we to say about these things?" St. Paul asked, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" And then answered in words that are precious enough to keep in your heart:

“I am convinced”—“I am certain” the older translation put it; I know, insofar as I am given to know anything—“that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Thanks be to God.